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# **Workplace Conflict and the Origins of the 1984-5 Miners' Strike in Scotland**

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## *Abstract*

Literature on the 1984-5 miners' strike in Britain tends to be dominated by examination of peak level relations between the Conservative government, the National Coal Board (NCB) and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). The strike is usually depicted as being illegitimately imposed, without a national ballot, on the industry and the miners by the NUM leadership. This article develops a more rounded perspective on the strike, by locating its origins in workplace conflict which had been steadily escalating in the early 1980s in the Scottish coalfields. A significant portion of Scottish miners, anxious about employment prospects, and angry about managerial incursions on established joint industrial regulation of daily mining operations, pushed their union towards a more militant position. This subverts the conventional picture of the strike as a top-down phenomenon. In this respect events in Scotland, which rarely feature in established literature, were in fact extremely important, shaping the national strike that emerged from the workforce's opposition to managerial authoritarianism as well as the closure of 'uneconomic' pits. The peak level context of deteriorating relations and pit

level details of incrementally intensifying workplace conflict are established through industry and trade union records and press accounts.

### *Key words*

Miners' strike; origins; workplace conflict

The 1984-5 miners' strike was a major event in Britain's late twentieth century development.<sup>1</sup> Its outcome, a shattering defeat for the miners and the labour movement more broadly, substantially altered Britain's subsequent economic and social trajectory, accelerating the transition from the privileging of producer to consumer interests and, in the spheres of work and employment relations, collective to individual identities.<sup>2</sup> The strike is usually understood in terms of peak level relations between the Conservative government, the NCB and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), with special emphasis on the roles of Margaret Thatcher, the Conservative Prime Minister, Ian MacGregor, NCB Chairman, and Arthur Scargill, NUM President, along with the movements in energy supply that decisively weakened the miners' bargaining

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<sup>1</sup> Research for this article was conducted with support from the Adam Smith Research Foundation at the University of Glasgow.

<sup>2</sup> Colin Crouch, 'From Labour Legislation and Public Policy towards a Flexible Labour Market: The Ambiguous Privatization of a Policy Area', *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations*, 23/24 (2007), 233-50; Paul Davies and Mark Freedland, *Towards a Flexible Labour Market: Labour Legislation and Regulation since the 1990s* (Oxford, 2007).

position.<sup>3</sup> Standard accounts normally also represent the strike as being illegitimately imposed, without a national ballot, on the industry and the miners by the NUM leadership, which ignored the logic of energy market changes and opposed any pit closures on economic grounds.<sup>4</sup> There are some studies of the strike that look beneath the surface of high politics. But these tend to overlook developments in the 'marginal' coalfields of Scotland, Durham and South Wales, reproducing the geographical focus of the high politics literature on the divisions between Yorkshire and Nottinghamshire.<sup>5</sup>

This article contributes to the historiography of the strike by locating and examining its origins in pit-level workplace conflict in Scotland. Miners anxious about employment prospects, and angry about managerial incursions on established joint industrial regulation of daily mining operations, pushed their union towards a more militant position. This subverts the conventional

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<sup>3</sup> Martin Adeney and John Lloyd, *The Miners' Strike, 1984-5: Loss Without Limit* (London, 1986); Paul Routledge, *Scargill. The unauthorized biography* (London, 1993); David Stewart, 'A Tragic "Fiasco"? The 1984-5 Miners' Strike in Scotland', *Scottish Labour History*, 41 (2006), 34-50; Andrew Taylor, *The NUM and British Politics. Volume 2: 1969-1995* (Aldershot, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Robert Taylor, *The Trade Union Question in British Politics* (Cambridge, 1993), 294-8; Alastair J. Reid, *United We Stand. A History of Britain's Trade Unions* (Harmondsworth, 2004), 402-4.

<sup>5</sup> Raphael Samuel, B. Bloomfield and G. Bonas (eds), *The Enemies Within: Pit Villages and the Miners' Strike of 1984-5* (London, 1986); Huw Beynon (ed.), *Digging Deeper. Issues in the Miners' Strike* (London, 1985); J. Winterton and R. Winterton, *Coal, Crisis and Conflict: The 1984-85 Miners' Strike in Yorkshire* (Manchester, 1989),; Andrew J. Richards, *Miners On Strike. Class Solidarity and Division in Britain* (Oxford, 1996).

way of understanding the strike as a top-down phenomenon, forced on the workforce by the union leadership. Events in Scotland were extremely important in this respect, shaping the national strike that emerged from the workforce's opposition to the closure of 'uneconomic' pits. Scottish collieries were highly vulnerable on these grounds. At the peak level joint industrial meeting on 6 March 1984 that immediately preceded the strike, the NCB circulated data purporting to show an overall projected deep-mining loss of £105.4 million on the 97.4 million tonnes of coal that would be mined in 1984-5: more than half of this deficit – £55.1 million – would be generated in producing just 5.15 million tonnes of coal in its Scottish Area.<sup>6</sup> In this context of market uncertainty industrial relations were highly adversarial: 50 per cent of miners in Scotland were already engaged in pit-level disputes in March 1984 when the national strike began. These disputes arose from the increasingly autocratic management of the industry in Scotland from 1982 to early 1984 that stemmed from anxieties about the insecure market position of Scottish coal. The strike is presented here as a legitimate and roughly democratic trade union response to the NCB Scottish Area's managerial style and strategy. It was not imposed externally on Scotland, via the ideological conflict between Conservative government and NUM leadership, but in fact

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<sup>6</sup> The National Archives: Public Record Office, Kew (hereafter TNA: PRO), COAL 74/4783, Coal Industry National Consultative Council Minutes (hereafter CINCC), 6 March 1984.

developed much of its national – that is, UK-wide – logic from the conflict between management and workers in the Scottish coalfields.<sup>7</sup>

From 1982 the strategy of the NCB's Scottish Area management involved 'testing' the supposed militancy of miners in Scotland by closing pits and making significant incursions on trade union responsibilities and privileges. The strategy was developed within the high political context of the 1980 Coal Industry Act, together with the 1983 Monopolies and Mergers Commission (MMC) report on the NCB.<sup>8</sup> These combined to produce a firm emphasis, in the context of market changes in energy supply, on controlling costs and tightening managerial control of production. Pits with relatively expensive production records were targeted, with new managers introduced by Albert Wheeler, the NCB's Scottish Area Director, who appeared keen to disrupt established management-union relations. Disputes were consequently provoked, sometimes where pre-shift emergency union meetings had been called to discuss responses to managerial initiatives that contravened joint industrial procedures. Workers subsequently reporting for work a few minutes late were sent home without pay. The established right of union delegates to conduct union business on NCB premises and in working hours was also challenged. The resulting incremental dissolution of the low level of 'trust', as

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<sup>7</sup> Terry Brotherstone and Simon Pirani, 'Were There Alternatives? Movements from Below in the Scottish Coalfield, the Communist Party, and Thatcherism, 1981-1985', *Critique*, 36-7 (2005), 99-124.

<sup>8</sup> The Monopolies and Mergers Commission, *National Coal Board. A Report on the efficiency and costs in the development, production and supply of coal by the National Coal Board*, Cmnd. 8920 (HMSO, 1983), Volumes One and Two.

management and industrial relations scholars would term it,<sup>9</sup> between management and employees, was instrumental to the outbreak of the strike in March 1984.

‘Trust’ in the coal industry was based on a complex pattern of joint industrial management. The nationalization arrangements in 1947 had encompassed a role for union and workforce representatives in managing various operational matters, including the design and execution of work, transferring miners between pits, especially where closures were projected, and health and safety questions.<sup>10</sup> This local joint industrial regulation buttressed peak level bargaining between the NCB and mining unions on wages and conditions of work more generally. These managerial and bargaining arrangements set coalmining apart from much of industry in the UK, the broad features of which were neatly summarized in Alan Fox’s 1966 research paper for the Donovan Commission on trade unions and employers’ organizations. This made the important distinction between ‘market relations’, the ‘terms and conditions on which labour is hired’, and ‘managerial relations’, ‘what management seeks to do with its labour having hired it’. Fox noted that while many employers accepted the legitimacy of settling market relations collectively rather than individually, there was strong resistance still in the

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<sup>9</sup> Peter Boxall and John Purcell, *Strategy and Human Resource Management* (Basingstoke, 2008); Karen Legge, *Human Resource Management: Rhetoric and Realities* (Basingstoke, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> Adeney and Lloyd, *Miners’ Strike*, 3-4.

1960s to trade union influence in managerial relations.<sup>11</sup> An authoritative survey of workplace relations twenty years later indicated that little had changed, with only a limited extension of employee involvement in managerial decision-making across a variety of industrial sectors.<sup>12</sup> In the coal industry workers' representatives, through local joint industrial regulation and peak level collective negotiations, clearly enjoyed an unusual degree of purchase in determining managerial as well as market relations.<sup>13</sup> But in Scotland from 1982 onwards NCB managers, seeking greater cost control, subverted established arrangements, and so contributed to a substantial escalation of workplace conflict. Workers engaged in these disputes pressed NUM officials to adopt a more militant position, although moves to take strike action in Scotland at various points between December 1982 and March 1984 against closures as well as managerial authoritarianism were blocked by divisions within the union's Scottish membership. A significant minority, demoralized by events, were not prepared to risk open conflict. This complex position, with the union pushed and constrained by competing strands of workplace opinion, before eventually effecting a militant collective response, contradicts the predominant view in the literature of the strike as an unambiguous top-down phenomenon. It also negates the suggestion that the strike in its Scottish

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<sup>11</sup> Alan Fox, *Industrial Sociology and Industrial Relations; Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Associations, Research Papers, 3* (HMSO, 1966), 6-7.

<sup>12</sup> Neil Millward and Mark Stevens, *British Workplace Industrial Relations, 1980-1984* (Aldershot, 1986), 36-53, 151-65.

<sup>13</sup> Jim Phillips, 'Industrial Relations, Historical Contingencies and Political Economy: Britain in the 1960s and 1970s', *Labour History Review*, 21 (2007), 215-33.



context was an exogenous imposition, arising from ideological conflict elsewhere in the UK between the government and the NUM.<sup>14</sup>

The article continues with a discussion of the high industrial politics of coal, which were important, involving attempts by the 1979 Conservative government to control and diminish state subsidy of mining through first the 1980 Coal Industry Act and then the 1983 MMC report, and deteriorating relations between NCB and NUM officials which are traced chiefly from minutes of meetings and correspondence between the two sides. These developments, especially the MMC report, encouraged initiatives already being undertaken by NCB officials to diminish the involvement of workforce representatives in the conduct of Fox's 'managerial relations' in Scottish collieries. These are examined in the final section of the article, with particular details from two collieries, Seafield and Monktonhall, to illustrate the dissolution of trust between managers and workers, and the incremental intensification of workplace conflict that eventually contributed to the outbreak of the national strike in March 1984. This analysis makes extensive use of little used archival sources, including government and National Coal Board (NCB) files released under Freedom of Information, and union materials located in the National Library of Scotland and the Scottish Mining Museum.

### *The high political context of pit-level conflict*

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<sup>14</sup> Keith Aitken, *The Bairns O' Adam. The Story of the STUC* (Edinburgh, 1997), 273-81. The strike has also been characterized as an exogenous imposition in Wales: Joe England, *The Wales TUC. Devolution and Industrial Politics* (Cardiff, 2004), 61-4.

Pit-level workplace conflict in the early 1980s was shaped by the changes in the high politics of the industry initiated by the election of Thatcher's Conservative government in 1979. High political accounts of the 1984-5 strike often intimate the Prime Minister's desire to 'avenge' the supposed humiliation of the previous Conservative government in the NUM's victorious strikes of 1972 and 1974, which were sustained by the substantial material grievances and engaged involvement of union members. Conservative leaders overlooked the role of popular agency in these disputes, however, emphasizing instead their allegedly undemocratic and intimidatory characteristics.<sup>15</sup> Although conflict with miners and their unions was not directly sought by the new government initially, the 1980 Coal Industry Act established the goal of an entirely self-funding, unsubsidized sector by 1983-4. This was 'almost impossible' to achieve, according to the coal industry's official historian: while revenues were falling as the recession reduced industrial demand for coal, the NCB still had to invest heavily in the modernization of capital stock. The related rapid rise in unemployment, particularly in manufacturing industries, complicated the position further, making it more difficult to remove 'surplus' NCB labour through redundancy.<sup>16</sup> The relatively young age profile of the workforce aggravated this difficulty, according to Ned Smith, the NCB's Industrial Relations Director General, with

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<sup>15</sup> Jim Phillips, 'The 1972 Miners' Strike: popular agency and industrial politics in Britain', *Contemporary British History*, 20 (2006), 187-207.

<sup>16</sup> William Ashworth, *The History of the British Coal Industry. Volume 5, 1946-1982: the Nationalized Industry* (Oxford, 1986), 414-15.

a dwindling number of miners aged 50 and over remaining by the early 1980s. Bringing production into line with demand would therefore be expensive, to the NCB and the government, in terms of significantly enhanced redundancy terms to younger miners, and to the coalfield communities stripped of well-paid employment.<sup>17</sup>

The social costs of the Coal Industry Act were strongly criticized, by Labour's Parliamentary spokesmen, David Owen and Alex Eadie, in private talks with the NCB and in the House of Commons,<sup>18</sup> and by mining unions in discussions with the NCB, the NUM articulating a rigid opposition to pit closures on market or economic grounds.<sup>19</sup> Tensions were further heightened in the autumn and winter of 1980-81, initially in the context of annual pay negotiations, and then when the NCB admitted that the Coal Industry Act necessitated large-scale pit closures. The NCB's pay offer in November was characterized by the NUM's Scottish Area leadership as 'Tory wage restraint', with the union national executive's recommendation that the terms be accepted a 'sell-out'. In a ballot of NUM members on the offer 73 per cent of votes in Scotland were against acceptance, as were 64.6 per cent in Yorkshire, 67.2 per cent in South Wales and 59.3 per cent in Kent. In Nottinghamshire 77.3 per cent of votes were in the opposite direction, as were

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<sup>17</sup> Ned Smith, *The 1984 Miners' Strike. The Actual Account* (Whitstable, 1997), 12-15.

<sup>18</sup> TNA: PRO, COAL 30/615, Note of Discussion between Sir Derek Ezra, NCB Chairman, and Labour Party Representatives, 3 June 1980; *Parliamentary Debates* (Commons), Fifth Series, 986, 17 June 1980, 1387-93, 1455-61.

<sup>19</sup> TNA: PRO, COAL 31/262, Minutes of a Meeting between the NCB and the National Executive Committee of the NUM, Hobart House, 18 June 1980.

78.7 per cent in the Midlands, contributing to the decisive 56-44 margin in favour of the offer.<sup>20</sup>

The relative although by no means homogeneous militancy of miners in Scotland owed much to embedded historical tradition. The legacy of the pre-1947 privately-owned industry, highly adversarial workplace relations, was partly ameliorated in the initial phase of nationalization, but substantial tensions re-emerged with the accelerated pit closures of the 1960s. A newer, angry mood was reflected in the election of Michael McGahey, a Communist, as NUM Scottish Area President in 1967, and the prominent role of Scottish miners in the national disputes of 1972 and 1973-4.<sup>21</sup> McGahey narrowly lost the national presidential election of 1971 but as national Vice President was prominent across British coalfield and industrial politics until his retirement in 1987.<sup>22</sup> The NUM's Scottish Area leadership, which included other Communists, was duly committed in broad terms to the 'left' strategy emerging in the early 1980s, articulated by the President from 1982, Arthur Scargill, of mobilising union activists and members to resist further closures through industrial action. Such strategy was prefigured by the crisis of February 1981, triggered by the NCB's proposed response to the Coal Industry Act and the recession-engineered drop in demand for coal. Continued capital investment would be financed through increased sales, obtained through lowering unit costs and more competitive marketing. But the

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<sup>20</sup> *Scottish Miner*, December 1980.

<sup>21</sup> Jim Phillips, *The Industrial Politics of Devolution: Scotland in the 1960s and 1970s* (Manchester, 2008), 117-41.

<sup>22</sup> Michael McGahey, Obituary, by Vic Allen, *The Guardian*, 1 February 1999.

price of aligning supply with demand was the withdrawal of ten million tonnes per annum of capacity,<sup>23</sup> requiring perhaps fifty closures over the five years, and the probable loss of 30,000 jobs. Cardowan in Lanarkshire was the largest Scottish pit threatened, the others including Highhouse and Sorn in Ayrshire.<sup>24</sup> Unofficial walk-outs ensued in protest at every pit in Scotland, and at a number of English and Welsh collieries. McGahey indicated that pithead meetings would be convened to make this strike official in Scotland, as Wheeler told him that Cardowan, Sorn and Highhouse would definitely close.<sup>25</sup> With the NUM executive agreeing unanimously to ballot for a national strike, pushed – McGahey emphasised privately – by the militancy of its members,<sup>26</sup> the government announced an unexpected u-turn. Cash limits on the industry, including the requirement to break even by 1983-4, were to be reviewed, and coal imports reduced: the unofficial strikes came to an end within two days.<sup>27</sup>

The government was, of course, essaying strategic retreat rather than surrender. McGahey, whose sense of history was rooted in the experiences of

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<sup>23</sup> Ashworth, *British Coal Industry*, 416-17.

<sup>24</sup> *The Times*, 11 and 19 February 1981.

<sup>25</sup> *Scottish Miner*, February 1981.

<sup>26</sup> Scottish Mining Museum, Newtongrange (hereafter SMM), National Union of Mineworkers Scottish Area (hereafter NUMSA), Minute of Conference of Delegates, 20 February 1981.

<sup>27</sup> *The Economist*, 21 February 1981, 35-6.

his father, sacked and victimized after the 1926 mining crisis,<sup>28</sup> likened events to 'Red Friday' in 1925,<sup>29</sup> when Stanley Baldwin's Conservative government averted a national coal strike by subsidizing extant wages for twelve months while organizing the emergency apparatus that broke the eventual post-subsidy lockout and General Strike.<sup>30</sup> McGahey was right about the Thatcher government's motives in 1981. While the cash limits and break-even targets of the Coal Industry Act were moderated by further legislation in 1982 and 1983,<sup>31</sup> the 'Ridley' programme for breaking any future miners' strike was developed, with new policing initiatives and the planned movement of coal, including increased imports, by non-union road haulage firms.<sup>32</sup> The NCB, meanwhile, quietly pursued its rationalization agenda at a local level. In the two years from March 1981 twenty pits were shut, the largest number of closures in a two-year period since 1973-4.<sup>33</sup> These developments rather belied the immediate claim in 1981 in an Institute of Economic Affairs-

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<sup>28</sup> Alan Campbell, 'Reflections on the 1926 Mining Lockout', *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations*, 21 (2006), 181.

<sup>29</sup> *Scottish Miner*, February 1981.

<sup>30</sup> John McIlroy, Alan Campbell and Keith Gildart, 'Introduction: 1926 and All That', in John McIlroy, Alan Campbell and Keith Gildart (eds), *Industrial Politics and the 1926 Mining Lockout* (Cardiff, 2004), 1-11.

<sup>31</sup> Winterton and Winterton, *Coal, Crisis and Conflict*, 20-2.

<sup>32</sup> Taylor, *NUM and British Politics*, 158-62.

<sup>33</sup> Ashworth, *British Coal Industry*, 418-9.

published pamphlet that the government and the NCB had cravenly bowed to the NUM's 'monopoly power'.<sup>34</sup>

The government's interest in seeking greater cost control in the coal industry was then pursued by another route, with the MMC appointed to investigate the NCB in March 1982. The NUM anticipated that this would generate substantial political pressure for the closure of mines on economic grounds. In discussions with Triple Alliance union partners in Scotland, the railwaymen and steel workers, McGahey linked this government-instigated 'attack' on nationalized industry with the incursions on trade union rights and privileges – chiefly in restricting the establishment and operation of union closed shops – that were embodied in the 1982 Employment Bill that was going through Parliament.<sup>35</sup> The MMC inquiry and later report confirmed McGahey's pessimism and contributed substantially to an erosion of trust between management and the workforce. NCB materials prepared for the MMC, detailing losses at numerous pits, were leaked to the NUM, just as it was concluding a strike ballot over predicted closures and the annual pay offer in October 1982. This yielded a decisive majority of 61 per cent against strike action, but there were majorities in favour in four areas: Kent and Scotland, both with 69 per cent, South Wales, with 59, and Yorkshire, with 56. Scargill argued that the MMC papers amounted to a closure 'hit list'. Meeting the NUM on 23 November, the NCB claimed that the papers represented

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<sup>34</sup> Colin Robinson and Eileen Marshall, *What Future for British Coal?* (London, 1981), 13-15.

<sup>35</sup> National Library of Scotland (hereafter NLS), Acc. 9805/263, Minute of Meeting of Triple Alliance, NUM (Scottish Area) offices, Edinburgh, Tuesday 4 May 1982.

‘research material’ rather than strategic planning,<sup>36</sup> although its chairman, Norman Siddall, had gathered reports beforehand from Area Directors, and Wheeler’s submission signalled an interest in closing Highhouse, Sorn and Killoch – also in Ayrshire – and Cardowan, ‘heavy losers’ all.<sup>37</sup> The NUM then produced a new ‘hit list’, of 55 pits, which in Scotland included Kinneil in West Lothian along with the four identified by Wheeler.<sup>38</sup>

The ‘hit list’ controversy contributed to a further deterioration of peak level industrial relations, with NUM officials protesting by boycotting the industry’s National Consultative Council from November 1982 to March 1983,<sup>39</sup> and deepened workplace anxieties in Scotland about the industry’s future. The MMC findings, submitted to the Department of Trade before Christmas 1982,<sup>40</sup> but not published by the government until after the General Election in June 1983, confirmed the essence of these concerns. A ten per cent cut in capacity was recommended, through closing pits with the highest losses per tonne.<sup>41</sup> Escalating labour costs were identified as exacerbating the industry’s unprofitability. Wages as a proportion of production costs had been increasing since the early 1970s, with miners exploiting the market

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<sup>36</sup> TNA: PRO, COAL 31/264, Statement to be made by Mr Siddall to the meeting with the NUM on 23 November 1982 on Mr Scargill’s ‘Disclosures’ on Colliery Closure.

<sup>37</sup> TNA: PRO, COAL 31/824, Wheeler to Siddall, 16 November 1982.

<sup>38</sup> *The Times*, 24 and 27 November 1982.

<sup>39</sup> TNA: PRO, COAL 74/4783, CINCC, 9 November 1982, 11 January 1983, 1 February 1983, 8 March 1983, 10 May 1983.

<sup>40</sup> TNA: PRO, COAL 74/4783, CINCC, 1 February 1983.

<sup>41</sup> MMC, *National Coal Board*, Volume One, 363-6.



advantages conferred by the escalating cost of oil relative to coal.<sup>42</sup> But the MMC related this outcome to the structure and composition of NCB management, with too many 'home-grown mining engineers' crowding out the potentially liberating presence of cost-controlling business executives from private industry.<sup>43</sup> Perhaps this especially is why Ian MacGregor, who became NCB Chairman in September 1983, characterized the report as his 'bible'.<sup>44</sup>

The MMC report emphasized the particularly uncompetitive nature of the 'peripheral coal-mining Areas'.<sup>45</sup> Productivity, including regional differentials, emerged in the 1970s as concerns at the NCB. Area-based incentive schemes were introduced in 1977-8, against union opposition in Kent, South Wales, Yorkshire and Scotland, but no particular overall productivity improvement resulted. Incentive earnings tended to be greater in areas where productivity was already higher, notably in Nottinghamshire. To the industry's official historian this suggested that 'low productivity may encourage habits and practices that tend to prolong it even when opportunities for change arise'.<sup>46</sup> But critics of the incentive schemes observed that area bonus differentials essentially reflected the comparative ease of coal-getting in more 'productive' areas, rather than the efforts expended, say, by Scottish as opposed to Nottinghamshire miners.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Robinson and Marshall, *British Coal*, 23-8, 51-2.

<sup>43</sup> MMC, *National Coal Board*, Volume One, 380-2.

<sup>44</sup> Adeney and Lloyd, *Miners' Strike*, 23, 27.

<sup>45</sup> MMC, *National Coal Board*, Volume One, 178.

<sup>46</sup> Ashworth, *British Coal Industry*, 371-3.

<sup>47</sup> Winterton and Winterton, *Coal, Crisis and Conflict*, 15-17.

This latter perspective was perhaps illustrated by the MMC's Scottish findings. Twelve Scottish collieries were identified as producing coal in 1981-2, the report omitting two others, Kinneil and Polmaise in Stirlingshire, both subject to development.<sup>48</sup> One of the producers, the 'Longannet complex' in West Fife, actually encompassed three separate collieries: Solsgirth, Castlehill and Bogside. These each fed coal by underground conveyance to Longannet, a huge South of Scotland Electricity Board power station.<sup>49</sup> Longannet's average output per man shift (OMS) in 1981-2 was 3.1 tonnes, the highest in Scotland, and exceeding the average across *all* NCB collieries of 2.4 tonnes. Among the other Scottish collieries only Monktonhall in Midlothian, with an OMS of 2.3 tonnes, neared the NCB average.<sup>50</sup> It is not possible to deduce from the MMC material that Longannet's superior productivity was simply the consequence of its technologically advanced extraction and conveyance, but it is also unlikely that the productivity gap to other Scottish pits was largely a question of worker effort and practices, as the official historian implied in his general deductions, and some NCB officials in Scotland alleged, as will become clear in the final part of this article.

The MMC drew attention also to the extent of losses in Scotland. Of the 'twelve' producers, six were losing more than £10 per tonne, and the others between £0 and £10 per tonne. The worst losses, £38.30 per tonne, were at

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<sup>48</sup> For detailed histories of these pits see Miles K. Oglethorpe, *Scottish Collieries. An Inventory of the Scottish Coal Industry in the Nationalised Era* (Edinburgh, 2006).

<sup>49</sup> Ashworth, *British Coal Industry*, 97.

<sup>50</sup> MMC, *National Coal Board*, Volume Two, Appendices 3.3 and 3.5a.

Cardowan.<sup>51</sup> The MMC acknowledged the political difficulty of closing pits in 'peripheral' areas where unemployment was already significantly above the UK average, but this was characterized as the government's responsibility, to ignore or remedy through regional policy.<sup>52</sup> The NCB's sole duty was to control costs, and the report's vivid findings duly placed great pressure on Scottish Area management to do so urgently. These observations chimed with a strategy already being developed by Albert Wheeler, involving costs controls in two ways: closing higher losing pits; and strengthening managerial prerogative by diminishing the role of joint industrial consultation, particularly in the sphere of what Alan Fox termed 'managerial relations', the manner in which labour was deployed.

*Workplace conflict and the origins of the miners' strike*

Wheeler's interest in closing collieries on economic grounds actually preceded the publication of the MMC report. In the summer of 1982, before the 'hit list' controversy, Wheeler persuaded the NCB to abandon underground development work in progress at Kinneil since 1978, connecting it to Longannet.<sup>53</sup> He claimed that geological difficulties associated with this work

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<sup>51</sup> MMC, *National Coal Board*, Volume One, 176.

<sup>52</sup> MMC, *National Coal Board*, Volume One, 369.

<sup>53</sup> TNA: PRO, COAL 89/222, P.M. Moullin, Deputy Secretary, NCB, to M. McNamara, Secretary, Scottish Area, 17 September 1982.

had created unacceptably high costs, and asked that the pit be shut.<sup>54</sup> Despite the opposition of workers, who were offered transfers to other pits, and the intervention of the NUM's national executive,<sup>55</sup> Kinneil was closed at the end of December. Attempts were made by union officials to muster a Scottish Area-wide strike in protest, through the established bureaucratic instruments of Area executive and pithead meetings.<sup>56</sup> These failed, with only a handful of pits coming out in support of Kinneil, illustrating in stark form the difficulty of defending endangered collieries through collective action.<sup>57</sup> The Area executive heard that some miners were pessimistic and feared isolation, doubting that action in defence of Kinneil would receive support beyond Scotland. Others resented the hand being offered to Kinneil, when the union had recently accepted the closure of other pits, notably Valleyfield in West Fife in 1978 and Bedlay in Lanarkshire in 1981.<sup>58</sup> This outcome perhaps encouraged Wheeler that the militancy of Scotland's miners, evidenced most

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<sup>54</sup> National Archives of Scotland (hereafter NAS), CB 335/14/1, Deputy Press Officer, Scottish Area, National Coal Board, to Chief Press Officer, National Coal Board, 17 September 1982.

<sup>55</sup> NAS, CB 335/14/1, Kinneil Colliery: Note of an informal meeting with the NUM held on Tuesday 14 December 1982 in the Board Room, Hobart House.

<sup>56</sup> SMM, NUMSA, Minute of Meeting of Executive Committee (hereafter EC), 20 December 1982.

<sup>57</sup> *Glasgow Herald*, 28 and 29 December 1982.

<sup>58</sup> SMM, NUMSA, EC, 27 December 1982, and Joint Conference of Mining Unions, 28 December 1982.

recently in the 69 per cent vote for strike action against closures in the NUM's October 1982 ballot,<sup>59</sup> might not obstruct his strategy.<sup>60</sup>

In 1983 Wheeler closed the small Ayrshire pits of Sorn and Highhouse before turning to Cardowan. Other Scottish pits were drawn into this conflict as the NCB attempted to weaken efforts to save Cardowan by dispersing its workforce. Transfers of Cardowan men were resisted by miners at 'receiving' collieries, largely because the NCB ignored the time-consuming established joint industrial procedures for managing this process, and partly because the men seeking transfers were regarded within the NUM as renegades for abandoning their pit.<sup>61</sup> Where the transfers were opposed Wheeler ordered that work cease altogether, so there were lengthy lock-outs at Cardowan and Polmaise, and stoppages at Bogside, Frances in Central Fife and Polkemmet in West Lothian.<sup>62</sup> This attrition eventually proved effective. When the NCB announced Cardowan's immediate closure on 25 August, the remaining 750 men – some 300 having accepted voluntary redundancy or transfer by agreement with union representatives – voted by a majority of 3 to 2 against industrial action to save the pit.<sup>63</sup> McGahey explained this in terms of management 'duplicity', the transfers in particular diminishing efforts to save Cardowan, and the macro-economic environment. 'Miners did not live in

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<sup>59</sup> *The Times*, 30 October and 3 November 1982.

<sup>60</sup> Brotherstone and Pirani, 'Were There Alternatives?', 107.

<sup>61</sup> SMM, NUMSA, EC, 12 July 1983, and Minute of Special Conference of Delegates, 12 July 1983.

<sup>62</sup> *The Scotsman*, 7-9 and 11-15 July 1983.

<sup>63</sup> *The Scotsman*, 26 and 27 August 1983.

isolation', he advised comrades on the Scottish Area executive, 'and their morale had been affected by 4 million unemployed'.<sup>64</sup>

After Cardowan, and perhaps spurred by the MMC report which appeared in June, Wheeler opened the second phase of his cost-control campaign. It has been written, and bears repeating here, that Wheeler pioneered MacGregor-style methods.<sup>65</sup> This runs true in his approach to closures, but especially also in his emphasis on deconstructing joint industrial regulation, which only emerged in full force in England *after* the 1984-5 strike.<sup>66</sup> In Scotland the NCB adopted an aggressively anti-union line from the closure of Kinneil onwards, with Wheeler squeezing his managers – and rotating them around collieries – to maximize short-term economic performance. The case of Seafield in Central Fife, which opened in 1966 and employed 1,300 miners in 1983, is highly germane here. In the NCB's 'bottom 30' in performance terms every year since 1976,<sup>67</sup> the pit's consultative committee minutes are highly revealing. At the beginning of the 1980s union-management relations remained positive despite the entrenched nature of the colliery's productivity difficulties. In July 1981, for instance, with output continually falling below target, a joint industrial team was established to explore the optimization of production. 'This', the official minutes read, 'would not be a fault finding exercise but a genuine attempt to improve the current

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<sup>64</sup> SMM, NUMSA, EC, 29 August 1983.

<sup>65</sup> Adeney and Lloyd, *Miners' Strike*, 52, 85-8.

<sup>66</sup> Taylor, *NUM and British Politics*, 235-80.

<sup>67</sup> *The Times*, 2 November 1982.

situation'.<sup>68</sup> But such emphasis on cooperative trust-building is rare in the committee's proceedings from May 1983, when George Caldow arrived from Comrie in West Fife to become Seafield's new manager. Caldow and his staff adopted an increasingly abrasive position, explaining the pit's historic shortfall in output in terms of the workforce's low work ethic, manifested in a refusal to operate 'diligently' and high levels of absenteeism. This claim was not unfounded, with a very modest increase in absenteeism, from around 13 per cent of all employees in 1981 to around 14 per cent in 1982 and 1983,<sup>69</sup> this exceeding absolute absenteeism across NCB holdings, and contradicting the slight downward national trend, from 12.4 per cent in the financial year 1980-1 to 10.8 per cent in the six months to October 1981 and then 10.1 per cent in 1982-3.<sup>70</sup> Union representatives claimed that Seafield's problems, including low employee motivation and the absenteeism rate, arose from workforce anxieties about the future and 'poor communication' between managers and workers. But these anxieties were ignored or ridiculed, with consultative meetings increasingly dominated by management lectures – assisted 'by use of the blackboard' – on the absence of worker effort.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> NAS, CB 398/3/2, National Coal Board – Scottish Area, Seafield Colliery, Minute of Colliery Consultative Committee (hereafter Seafield CCC), 14 March 1980 and 14 July 1981.

<sup>69</sup> NAS, CB 398/3/2, Seafield CCC, 1981-83: author's calculations on the basis of absenteeism levels reported to Seafield CCC at the mid-point of the months of February, April, June, August, October and December in each year.

<sup>70</sup> TNA: PRO, COAL 74/4805, CINNC, 10 March 1981 and 10 November 1981, and COAL 74/4806, CINNC, 8 March 1983.

<sup>71</sup> NAS, CB 398/3/2, Seafield CCC, 24 May 1983, 28 June 1983 and 12 July.

Caldow's impatience was clear by the autumn of 1983. There was a particular problem with installing new cutting machinery. Union delegates suggested that more dialogue with the men would improve results, but Caldow now adopted what Alan Fox would have characterized as an utterly 'unitary' managerial position.<sup>72</sup> Proceeding on the basis that employees had no legitimate interests distinct from those that management unilaterally defined, he was intent on eliminating their involvement in planning and organizing the labour process. 'Talking was not the answer', Caldow said, and when the problem persisted into November he declared his intention to state 'precisely what he wanted done and if it was not carried out there would be dismissals'.<sup>73</sup> Two further albeit brief meetings of the consultative committee took place before Caldow suspended joint industrial practices altogether in January 1984. The committee did not sit again until June 1985, three months after the year-long strike had finished.<sup>74</sup>

The deterioration of relations at Seafield was reflected elsewhere in the Scottish coalfield in the second half of 1983, most notably at Monktonhall in Midlothian, scene of a seven week stoppage of work from 14 September to 7 November. This was another major employer, with 1,570 miners, and, like Seafield, a young pit, opened in 1967. The production position there had been reasonably favourable, with the 1981-2 OMS just 0.1 tonnes below the NCB average, and an outgoing manager in the spring of 1983 commended by the

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<sup>72</sup> Fox, *Industrial Sociology*, 6-7.

<sup>73</sup> NAS, CB 398/3/2, Seafield CCC, 27 September 1983 and 8 November 1983.

<sup>74</sup> NAS, CB 398/3/2, Seafield CCC, 6 December 1983, 17 January 1984 and 4 June 1985.



pit's joint consultative committee for 2½ years of 'excellent results'.<sup>75</sup> But there were difficulties developing in the second and third quarters of 1983, chiefly relating to output,<sup>76</sup> and these shaped a dispute which was provoked by William Kennedy, who moved from Polkemmet to become Monktonhall's manager in the summer of 1983. This pattern of management-worker relations worsening under a new manager resembled developments at Seafield, and was noted by Monktonhall union delegates who thought that Wheeler had briefed Kennedy to seek confrontation with his new employees.<sup>77</sup> Early in August he suspended all development work at Monktonhall, including drivages into the Peacock seam that unions and management had jointly reaffirmed as recently as May as being central to the pit's long-term future.<sup>78</sup> Kennedy told union delegates that development work would resume only when output increased to the point where losses were reversed and the pit was breaking even. David Hamilton, the colliery's NUM delegate, said that suspending development work was wrong, and in any case should not have been announced before consultation with the workers, whose morale was greatly shaken by the apparent dwindling of the pit's future prospects. Kennedy responded in the same terms that Caldow used at

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<sup>75</sup> NAS, CB 363/3/3, National Coal Board, Monktonhall Colliery, Minute of Colliery Consultative Committee (hereafter Monktonhall CCC), 4 May 1983.

<sup>76</sup> NAS, CB 363/3/3, Monktonhall CCC, 15 June 1983.

<sup>77</sup> *The Scotsman*, 14 October 1983.

<sup>78</sup> NAS, CB 363/3/3, Monktonhall CCC, 4 May 1983.

Seafield. With ‘major surgery’ required to make Monktonhall ‘viable’, it was ‘time for action not words’.<sup>79</sup>

Kennedy, again mirroring Caldow, claimed that Monktonhall’s chief problem was poor worker effort,<sup>80</sup> especially at the pit’s newest face, L43, where production had started in March 1983, with ‘good results’ initially reported, before difficulties emerged in June.<sup>81</sup> Hamilton suggested that a more flexible deployment of cutting machinery along the face – at the workers’ discretion rather than within the narrow spatial confines of managerial prescription – would improve production.<sup>82</sup> Colliery managers resisted this, intent on tightening their control of labour and production processes, and – like Cowan at Seafield – eroding worker and union involvement in ‘managerial relations’. Instead Kennedy accused 63 face workers by letter of restricting effort and threatened their dismissal unless improved output ensued in the following two weeks. This letter was written in irregular circumstances. Kennedy spent a whole night shift on L43 with Hamilton on Monday 15 August before accepting that work was being conducted normally. But he persisted, inspecting the face again with other union representatives on 25 August, although only for part of a shift. Joint industrial regulation required that the full shift be inspected prior to any disciplinary procedures being initiated. So when Kennedy nevertheless declared his intention to threaten the men for their

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<sup>79</sup> NAS, CB 363/3/8, Monktonhall CCC, 10 August 1983.

<sup>80</sup> NAS, CB 363/3/8, Monktonhall CCC, 24 August 1983.

<sup>81</sup> NAS, CB 363/3/3, Monktonhall CCC, 2 March, 16 March, 13 April and 15 June 1983.

<sup>82</sup> NAS, CB 363/3/8, Monktonhall CCC, 27 July 1983.

rationing of labour,<sup>83</sup> he directly contravened established procedures and further antagonized his employees.<sup>84</sup>

Kennedy's next provocative move was to offer voluntary redundancies to men aged 50 and over, with an intended target of 300 and no transfers available. This was made over the heads of union representatives, and so again broke agreed joint industrial procedures. It also countermanded an assurance given three months earlier by management that workers younger than 55 would only be offered redundancy where agreement had first been reached with the unions.<sup>85</sup> Before the 7 a.m. shift on Wednesday 14 September Hamilton called a meeting of NUM members to discuss the crisis. Many of the 150 men attending then reported for work several minutes late. Management refused to let them go underground. This deliberate lockout, noted Robbie Dinwoodie of *The Scotsman* a few weeks later, was not the act of management seeking to avoid confrontation,<sup>86</sup> and those already below came back up and walked out. The subsequent back and night shifts voted not to work in protest.<sup>87</sup>

Monktonhall union officials recommended an indefinite strike, which the men agreed to support on 15 September. This was made official by an NUM

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<sup>83</sup> NAS, CB 363/17/12, Minute of Meeting between Management and Trade Union Representatives, Monktonhall Colliery, 25 August 1983.

<sup>84</sup> *The Scotsman*, 14 October 1983.

<sup>85</sup> NAS, CB 363/3/3, Monktonhall CCC, 1 June 1983.

<sup>86</sup> *The Scotsman*, 14 October 1983.

<sup>87</sup> *Glasgow Herald*, 15 September 1983.

Scottish Area delegate conference,<sup>88</sup> just as Ian MacGregor heightened the tension further during his first visit as NCB chairman to Scotland. While praising worker effort at neighbouring Bilston Glen, where he went underground, MacGregor was scathing about Monktonhall's 'second division' miners, whose alleged inability to use machinery effectively suggested shameful comparisons with mechanized pits in the USA.<sup>89</sup> In this context of escalating worker-management conflict the Monktonhall strike lasted until November, supported by a one-day official stoppage across the Scottish coalfields on 17 October.<sup>90</sup> McGahey, reporting privately to Triple Alliance steel and rail transport union allies, emphasized that the crisis was part of the NCB's larger anti-union approach in Scotland,<sup>91</sup> evidenced already at Seafield, and further exemplified at Monktonhall when the dispute ended in November, after Wheeler agreed to discuss the pit's future with unions at Area level.<sup>92</sup> Kennedy then unilaterally narrowed the allowances admitted to union delegates for conducting official business on NCB premises during working hours. 'All persons' should be 'gainfully employed', he told Hamilton, who on the first day back was refused permission to catch up with the significant backlog of union work that had accumulated during the seven week

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<sup>88</sup> SMM, NUMSA, EC, 10 October 1983.

<sup>89</sup> *Glasgow Herald*, 16 and 21 September 1983.

<sup>90</sup> SMM, NUMSA, Minute of Special Conference of Delegates, 3 November 1983.

<sup>91</sup> NLS, Acc. 9805/263, Minute of Meeting of Triple Alliance, 29 September 1983.

<sup>92</sup> SMM, NUMSA, Minute of Special Conference of Delegates, 3 November 1983.

stoppage.<sup>93</sup> Anti-union activities had also been seen elsewhere as workers at other collieries mobilized in support of Monktonhall. At Frances on 23 September the branch delegate, John Mitchell, was sacked after organizing a cash collection for the Monktonhall strikers. There was an immediate walk out by 400 men, and Mitchell was reinstated only after senior NUM and NCB officials intervened.<sup>94</sup> At Polmaise 130 men were sent home without pay on 28 September after arriving several minutes late, having attended a union meeting to collect cash for Monktonhall. John McCormack, Polmaise union delegate, interpreted this as a lockout, engineered by Donald Cameron, pit manager, as revenge for the 'row in July', when the workforce had opposed the Cardowan transfers.<sup>95</sup>

Polmaise, with these tense management-worker relations signalling more profound problems, duly assumed a central position in the crisis developing in the industry in the winter of 1983-4. Like Kinneil in 1982 it was a 'development' pit. No coal was being mined but it contained substantial reserves, employed 400 men, and had been the subject of investment amounting to £22 million since 1980. Now, again like Kinneil, Wheeler proposed writing this off and closing the pit, citing substantial geological difficulties, and offering transfers to the Longannet complex from where the Polmaise reserves could be accessed.<sup>96</sup> The NCB communicated its decision

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<sup>93</sup> NAS, CB 363/17/8, Minute of Meeting held between Management and NUM, Monktonhall Colliery, 7 November 1983.

<sup>94</sup> SMM, NUMSA, EC, 26 September 1983; *Glasgow Herald*, 24 September 1983.

<sup>95</sup> *Glasgow Herald*, 29 September 1983, and *The Scotsman*, 13 October 1983.

<sup>96</sup> *The Scotsman*, 1 December 1983.

to close Polmaise to the NUM's Scottish Area representatives on 13 January 1984.<sup>97</sup> Wheeler had said – when announcing Cardowan's demise in May 1983 – that no more colliery closures were envisaged in Scotland, and that the Polmaise investment guaranteed 'long-term' job security at the pit.<sup>98</sup> On 26 January, just eight months later, Wheeler visited the pit's welfare club to confirm Polmaise's end.<sup>99</sup> On 6 February the NCB ratified this decision, communicated in writing to the various unions involved, which then exercised their right to a final appeal under the board's Colliery Review Procedure. This was scheduled for 14 March, but was not heard, given the outbreak of the national strike on 12 March.<sup>100</sup>

McGahey and other Scottish union officials were being pressed by their members, especially from Polmaise, to engineer an official Area-wide strike against the threat of closures and management's abrasive conduct. Area executive and delegate meetings, on 13 February, faced a counter-veiling strand of opinion. Cautious, to an extent demoralized by the apparent difficulties of mounting effective collective action against closures and Wheeler's anti-unionism, this strand initially prevailed, with immediate strike action rejected.<sup>101</sup> But at the same time an official response to the crisis was

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<sup>97</sup> *The Scotsman*, 14 January 1984.

<sup>98</sup> *Glasgow Herald*, 14 May 1983.

<sup>99</sup> *Courier & Advertiser* and *The Scotsman*, both 27 January 1984.

<sup>100</sup> NAS, CB 382/14/1, D.G. Brandrick, secretary, NCB, to Lawrence Daly, [outgoing] general secretary, NUM, 6 February 1984.

<sup>101</sup> SMM, NUMSA, EC, and Minute of Special Conference of Delegates, both 13 February 1984.

staked out, with pithead meetings of members across the coalfield and then Area executive and delegate meetings on 20 February securing authority for the Scottish Area executive to call any action deemed necessary to halt closures.<sup>102</sup> These meetings formed the basis for the legitimacy of the subsequent strike in Scotland. Unlike parallel legal initiatives in England and Wales in the course of 1984, which resulted in the London High Court ruling that the strike in these countries was illegal, on the grounds that the NUM had broken its rules by not balloting members,<sup>103</sup> efforts by working miners in Scotland to have the strike similarly outlawed in the High Court in Edinburgh were unsuccessful. Lord Jauncey ruled in November 1984 that the NUM's Scottish Area had acted according to its rules and therefore legally, obtaining the agreement of members for strike action at the pit head meetings in February.<sup>104</sup>

The strike in Scotland would be in support not just of Polmaise, but other pits in difficulty, notably Bogside, the closure of which was announced in the first week of February.<sup>105</sup> This was the result of flooding, the crisis shaped initially in the context of the NUM overtime ban, in place since November, designed to pressurize the NCB on the annual wage claim and the potential

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<sup>102</sup> SMM, NUMSA, EC and Minute of Special Conference of Delegates, both 20 February 1984. See also *Glasgow Herald*, 14, 16, 21 and 27 February 1984; *The Scotsman*, 7 March 1984; *The Times*, 7 March 1984.

<sup>103</sup> Adeney and Lloyd, *Miners' Strike*, 161-2, 172-4.

<sup>104</sup> Eric Clarke with Bob McLean, 'The Mineworkers' Strike 1984-5: the Role of the Scottish Area as Banker to the Union', *Scottish Affairs*, 49 (2004), 142-4.

<sup>105</sup> *Courier & Advertiser*, 7 February 1984.

threat of pit closures.<sup>106</sup> In Scotland there was the added complicating element of Wheeler's response to the ban. Unlike other area chairmen, from December he refused to countenance special precautionary measures at weekends, when the NUM action prevented the normal conduct of safety and maintenance operations. Wheeler placed particular fetters on members of the British Association of Colliery Managers, stopping them from operating surface machinery, normally handled by NUM members, which enabled the safety men, members of the NACODS union, to run the pumps and fans underground that kept pits in operation.<sup>107</sup> This differed from the practice adopted in England and Wales, where colliery managers were providing safety cover.<sup>108</sup>

It was in this context of escalating tension that the 'rolling' strike across the Scottish, English and Welsh coalfields commenced on 12 March. Conventional accounts generally agree on two key 'triggers' in the first week of March: the surprise announcement of the closure of Cortonwood colliery, which led to an official Area-wide strike in Yorkshire, resembling developments in Scotland, and the peak level joint industrial talks in London, when the NCB's proposed budget and production target for 1984-5 indicated a requirement to close 20 pits with perhaps 20,000 job losses, the burden of these cuts falling in the 'heavy losing' areas of Scotland, South Wales and

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<sup>106</sup> Winterton and Winterton, *Coal, Crisis and Conflict*, 60-3.

<sup>107</sup> *The Scotsman*, 1 December 1983.

<sup>108</sup> *Courier & Advertiser*, 22 February 1984.



Kent.<sup>109</sup> McGahey emerged from these talks and, as has often been recorded, grimly declared that a 'domino' effect strike would develop, starting in Scotland and Yorkshire on 12 March, and joined incrementally by the NUM's other federal areas – adopting similar methods of consultation to those used in Scotland – until the entire coalfield was out.<sup>110</sup> This indirect route to a national strike would obviate the need for a national ballot, the outcome of which was difficult to predict, given that the issue of pit closures was potentially divisive, not affecting all members equally.<sup>111</sup> The demand by a majority of Scottish miners for a militant response in defence of their pits would consequently be met, the prospect of broader mobilization across the British coalfields helping to overcome the opposition of the minority of miners in Scotland who were resistant to collective action.<sup>112</sup>

These peak level and Yorkshire developments were clearly significant in shaping the timing of the outbreak of the strike. But it is important also to re-emphasize that the strike in Scotland was based on the substantial reservoir of tension developing at pit level in the course of the preceding fifteen months or so, and the NUM Scottish Area's careful and tortuously constructed response. Wheeler's unyielding approach, evident in the handling of the

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<sup>109</sup> Richards, *Miners on Strike*, 100-10; Winterton and Winterton, *Coal, Crisis and Conflict*, 64-72.

<sup>110</sup> Taylor, *NUM and British Politics*, 186-7. McGahey's famous words of 6 March, including the telling phrase, 'We shall not be constitutionalized out of our jobs', feature in David Peace's remarkable novel, *GB84* (London, 2004), 6.

<sup>111</sup> Huw Beynon, 'Introduction', in Beynon *Digging Deeper*, 12-13.

<sup>112</sup> SMM, NUMSA, EC, 6 March 1984.

Cardowan closure and the subsequent transfers and lock-outs at other pits, and the non-conduct of weekend safety work in the course of the NUM overtime ban, had contributed in significant measure to the entrenchment of workplace conflict across the Scottish coalfield, particularly at Seafield, Monktonhall and Polmaise. *The Scotsman*, following NCB intelligence, predicted that 50 per cent of NUM members in Scotland would ignore their Area executive and work normally,<sup>113</sup> but this was over-optimistic. Only at Bilston Glen were there enough miners to produce coal on the morning of 12 March, and even this pit was closed later that day, the afternoon shift kept out by an enlarged picket line, reinforced by a coach load of angry and determined Polmaise men. Production, Scottish Office officials noted, was now 'at a standstill' across the Scottish coalfield.<sup>114</sup>

Strike commitment in Scotland was subsequently very strong, although not universal. From the outset union officials were most worried about the position at Bilston Glen.<sup>115</sup> Coal was being produced there by June, and ten per cent of its workers were back by September. At other pits strike-breaking was negligible until November, when, in the context of Christmas bonuses offered to those returning by the third week of that month, the number working

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<sup>113</sup> *The Scotsman*, 10 March 1984.

<sup>114</sup> NAS, SOE 12/571, J. Hamill, Scottish Home and Health Department, 'Miners' Strike: Picketing at Bilston Glen Colliery, Midlothian', 13 March 1984, and J.F. Laing, Industry Department for Scotland, Note for Ministers Meeting at 2 p.m., 13 March 1984; *The Scotsman*, 13 March 1984.

<sup>115</sup> SMM, NUMSA, Box 13, Minute of Meeting of NUMSA Strike Committee, 19 March 1984.

escalated significantly, particularly at Bilston Glen and Killoch. The existence of this minority of working miners was a reminder of the difficulties that faced the NUM in mobilizing a collective defence of jobs at endangered pits. But elsewhere the workplace anger evident from 1982 onwards was carried forward in remarkable displays of strike commitment: at the Longannet complex the strike was virtually solid until the end, with only a handful of strike-breakers; at Seafield only 11.8 per cent were working as late as 11 February 1985, while a larger fragment, but still a minority, 32.1 per cent, were back at Monktonhall; and when the NUM finally sanctioned an organized return to work on 11 March 1985, the miners of Polmaise stayed out for one more week.<sup>116</sup>

### *Conclusion*

This article has examined details from the development and escalation of workplace conflict in the coal industry in Scotland to suggest an altered emphasis in explaining the outbreak of the national miners' strike in 1984. Established perspectives generally privilege high politics, ideological tensions between Conservative government and NUM leadership, and the top-down nature of the strike, devised and enforced by Arthur Scargill and his allies on the national union executive. The evidence presented here indicates that the

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<sup>116</sup> NAS, SEP 4/6028, Scottish Office Situation Report, 20 June 1984; NAS, SEP 4/6029/1, Scottish Office Situation Reports, 12 November 1984, 30 November 1984, 11 February 1985, 11 March 1985.

strike was not imposed on Scottish miners by an ideologically-rigid national union leadership, but in fact drew much of its energy and impetus from the workforce's resistance to the managerial strategy of cost control through pit closures and the downgrading of joint industrial regulation. High industrial politics were of significance. The deterioration of trust evident in the crisis of February 1981 and the subsequent arguments about the NCB's 'hit list' in 1982 and 1983 contributed to workforce anxieties and prefigured the outbreak of the strike in 1984, where there was a significant role for union leadership. NUM Scottish Area officials were broadly supportive of the union left's attempt to organise a collective response to the crisis, and the national 'rolling' strike provided the broader mobilization that many regarded as a prerequisite of the defence of endangered Scottish pits. The competitive position too was of great importance. This article has demonstrated that the Scottish Area management's programme of closures anticipated and was then further emboldened by the 1983 MMC report, with its focus on the need to reduce capacity and control costs. Wheeler's strategy went beyond closures and cutting capacity, however, involving also a pronounced diminution of joint industrial management in the industry. This worried miners and their union officials in England and Wales as well as Scotland, and in this sense Scottish developments directly prefigured the strike across the British coalfields.

The Seafield and Monktonhall cases demonstrate the various elements of managerial strategy, and its contribution to the serious deterioration in industrial relations that eventually resulted in the 1984-5 strike. At each pit managers sought to diminish significantly the involvement of workers and their union representatives in the planning and organization of production, or what

Alan Fox called 'managerial relations', the manner in which labour was deployed. This management attack on joint consultation and regulation, embedded features of coal's industrial politics, represented a fundamental breach of trust. At Monktonhall a new manager was appointed who, in a drive to increase production and control costs, accused his employees of withholding their efforts and then set aside agreed industrial procedures. He duly provoked a lengthy stoppage of work in the autumn of 1983, and when this came to an end the position of trade unionism in regulating daily operations was further undermined, with the NUM delegate's freedom to undertake union business in working hours and on NCB premises severely curtailed. At Seafield a new manager was also appointed in 1983, who recurrently explained the colliery's production performance in terms of the workforce's low diligence and high absenteeism. Dismissals were threatened and in January 1984 joint industrial practices suspended altogether. The resulting stoppage of work was still in place in March 1984, at which point – shaped by the projected closure of Polmaise but also by events at Monktonhall, Seafield and elsewhere in Scotland – the NUM's Scottish Area leadership was compelled by its members to engineer the start of an official strike, this action coinciding with the start of the 'rolling' strike in Yorkshire that then spread across parts of the English and Southern Welsh coalfields. On the basis of the evidence presented here, of management's quest for confrontation and deliberate cultivation of low trust relations, the strike ought to be seen as the direct product of workplace conflict as well as the consequence of deteriorating peak level relations in the context of coal's diminishing market position.

9050 words, including footnotes, abstract and key words